

## BHABHIS

*Woh Teri Bhabhi Hai, Pagle* (Madman, She's Your Sister-in-law)

*Bhabhiji Ghar Par Hain?* (Is Bhabhiji at Home?)

*Hum Aapke Hain Kaun* (Who am I of Yours?)

—(Titles of two Hindi TV soap operas and a Bollywood film)

Prashant and Rakesh have been friends since their days together in college. Prashant is now married to Sunita, while Rakesh is unmarried. For Rakesh, Sunita is his bhabhi, or sister-in-law, even though they are not related by blood or law. All three characters star in a hugely popular Youtube video that has gathered over 27 million views so far.<sup>4</sup> Titled 'Lunch with my Friend's Wife', this video charts the course of a lazy Sunday morning. Rakesh is on his way to Prashant's house for lunch. He is in a good mood, humming old Hindi romantic songs. Then he gets a call from Prashant, which causes him some annoyance. Prashant says he has had to go out on an urgent matter and will not be back for another two hours. Rakesh says he will go ahead to Prashant's house anyway. When Prashant tells Rakesh to wait for him at a coffee shop instead, Rakesh guffaws that he will do nothing of the kind. 'Silly fellow,' he says a minute later, 'suspects me of flirting with his wife.'

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4. This video is based on a true story: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rEm-w5WPH58>

Rakesh reaches Prashant's house soon enough and is greeted by his Sunita bhabhi, who seems to be a bit out of sorts. Over lunch, Rakesh asks her why she is looking upset. Sunita then embarks on a tale of marital woe in which Prashant, though a loving and attentive husband, is no longer sexually attracted to his wife. The couple does not have sex, Sunita complains, unless she complies with Prashant's 'weird' desires. When Rakesh asks her what those desires are, she refuses to answer, and runs off sobbing into the bedroom, where she flings herself on her bed. After a couple of perplexed moments, Rakesh follows Sunita into the bedroom, starts to wipe away her tears, and then the inevitable happens. The only word that can be heard as they get hot and heavy is 'Bhabhi, oh Bhabhi' repeated many times over. The next scene focuses on the post-coital moment—Sunita is patting her hair back in place, Rakesh wakes up and starts smoking a cigarette. The atmosphere between them seems strained. Then Sunita looks at Rakesh in the mirror and says, 'For how long will all this continue, Prashant?'

The entire film then plays out in flashback: 'Rakesh' gets Sunita to call him in the guise of Prashant to say he will not be at home. This puts Rakesh and his 'bhabhi' in a potentially compromising situation, flagged by Rakesh's laughing comment about flirting with Prashant's wife. Sunita bhabhi then talks about Prashant's weird desires, followed by Rakesh trying to comfort his bhabhi by having sex with her. The film pivots on and leads up to the fact that Prashant can only have sex with his wife if he is 'Rakesh' and sees her as his bhabhi. This is the 'weird' desire to which Sunita refers early on in the film. The desire that desexualizes wives, and hyper-sexualizes sisters-in-law.

Prashant desires Sunita sexually only when he can see her as his sister-in-law rather than as his wife. In much of the post-Freudian West, the cult of the desirable older woman has been cast in the mould of the mother figure (displayed powerfully in a film like *The Graduate*). But in India, illicit male desire tends to be focussed on an older female figure who is *not* the mother while still being a relative in the family.

This older female relative is the 'bhabhijaan' of Vishal Bhardwaj's 2014 film *Haider*. Based on William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, *Haider* is the third in Bhardwaj's Shakespeare trilogy, after *Maqbool* (Macbeth) and *Omkara* (Othello). In Shakespeare's play, the protagonist is gutted because his father has been murdered by his uncle, Claudius, who has also married Hamlet's mother Gertrude. In the Shakespearean family tree, Gertrude is, of course, Claudius's bhabhi. Sigmund Freud famously used Hamlet as an example of the Oedipus complex—where the son is jealous of the father and sexually possessive about the mother. For Freud, 'Hamlet is able to do anything—except take vengeance on the man who did away with his father and took that father's place with his mother, the man who shows him the repressed wishes of his own childhood realized. Thus the loathing, which should drive him on to revenge, is replaced in him by self-reproaches, by scruples of conscience, which remind him that he himself is literally no better than the sinner whom he is to punish.' Freud discusses Hamlet in relation to his theory of the Oedipus complex, and most commentators have understood this to mean that Hamlet is the son who wants to sleep with Gertrude, the mother. But what if Hamlet is reacting badly not because of the thwarted desire of a son for his mother, but because of the fulfilled desire of a brother-in-law for his

sister-in-law? Is he furious with Claudius because Claudius is the brother-in-law who now has sexual access to his bhabhi? Does Hamlet's dilemma in the play owe to the fact that the brother-in-law's sexual interest in the bhabhi is socially accepted as being next only to the husband's while the son's desire is not accepted at all? After all, marrying a husband's younger brother was quite a widely accepted practice even in England. Henry VIII, father of the Queen of England in Shakespeare's time, married Katherine of Aragon, his older brother Arthur's widow.

Hamlet's Hindustani rendition in *Haider* thus points to a more widespread and acceptable version of male desire—that of a man's for his older brother's wife.

The character of Gertrude is central to Shakespeare's play, but Vishal Bhardwaj makes her even more central to his film. *Haider's* Gertrude and Claudius are Ghazala and Khurram. In response to Ghazala's question about why he is not married, Khurram says he will only marry someone as wonderful as his bhabhijaan. And so it comes to pass. Khurram arranges for his brother's death, and marries Ghazala, who is shown to reciprocate his desire for her. In fact, Ghazala's desire is so obvious in the film that it becomes hard to ignore. Married to a man who puts duty above love, Ghazala is no longer sexually attractive to her husband. And she has always been sexually desirable for her devar, or younger brother-in-law. Ghazala seeks and accepts emotional and sexual sustenance from Khurram rather than from her son, Haider. Nor does this seem unusual. Even as they are publicly mourning his dead brother, Khurram asks the gathered community for permission to marry his bhabhijaan in order to look after her welfare. The members of the community are unfazed. Of

course the younger brother ‘looks after’ the older brother’s wife—this has long been a tradition in India.

After all, the etymology of *devar* is *doosra var*—or second husband. In the conservative book of laws, the *Manusmriti*, this tradition of marrying a dead brother’s wife is known as *niyoga*, or delegation. It describes a practice common in Vedic times in which the brother-in-law is allowed to have sexual relations with, and even marry, his *bhabhi* for the sake of her welfare and in order to produce offspring. As Sudhir Kakar describes it in *Intimate Relations*, ‘the psychological core of *niyoga* [is] the mutual awareness of a married woman and her younger brother-in-law as potential or actual sex partners.’ In fact, so common does *niyoga* seem to have been that Chapter IX of the *Manusmriti* lays out in great detail the protocols by which it should be governed:

1. It can only happen when the husband is impotent or infertile or has died without producing an offspring
2. It can take place only with the consent of the woman, and only for the purpose of having a child, not for pleasure
3. The man picked for the task should ideally be an immediate family member. The *Manusmriti* names only the husband’s brother as a familial candidate; other contenders are gods or venerable sages
4. One man can perform *niyoga* only three times in his lifetime (lest he get addicted to having sex with his brother’s wife)
5. The child born of this union would be considered to belong to the woman and her deceased/infertile husband rather than to the sexual partner, who is not allowed to make any paternal claim

6. Both sexual partners need to cover their bodies in ghee so that they cannot linger on the contours of the body for pleasure and will focus only on the acts required for reproduction.

Niyoga delegates have had a long and hoary history in Hindu tradition. Without them, for instance, the *Mahabharata* would not have had a story worth telling. Both patriarchs of the warring factions, Dhritarashtra (father of the Kauravas) and Pandu (sire of the Pandavas), were born only because Queen Satyawati forces her son, the sage Vyasa, to have sex with his dead brother Vichitravirya's widows, Ambika and Ambalika. (Vyasa also fathers a son with Ambika and Ambalika's maid, who is the first woman to be sent in to Vyasa because the two sisters were terrified by his fierce appearance.) King Pandu, one of the products of this niyoga, in turn has his wives impregnated by several gods because he is cursed to die if he ever approaches a woman with amorous intent. And thus are born the Pandavas. When the *Mahabharata* enters the epic stage, then, all its main actors are in place thanks to the fact that women have had sex with men who are not their husbands, and in the case of Vyasa, the sisters-in-law have had sex with their brother-in-law.

While Vyasa is the older brother of Vichitravirya, and dominates his sisters-in-law, such a structure of patriarchal sexual privilege is the exception in cases of bhabhi desire. Definitionally, bhabhis are older and more sexually experienced than the brothers-in-law; in the bhabhi-devar configuration of desire, the man is the dependent one. Sometimes, though, the desire between the bhabhi and the devar can highlight how both are lower in a pecking order

that is dominated by the older man—the bhabhi's husband, and the devar's brother. The two get up to mischief because they are both consigned to a place of frivolity. This is certainly the treatment that Rabindranath Tagore gives to the bhabhi (or boudhan in Bengali)-devar romance in his short novella *Nashtanir*, which was later turned into an acclaimed film and named *Charulata* after its female protagonist. In the novella, Charu and her loving-yet-distant husband Bhupati's younger cousin, Amal, build a bond over a shared love of literature. The intensity of their emotional interactions, the quality of their literary encounters, their moments and months of privacy, rise to a crescendo that is breathtaking in its intimation of a love that dare not speak its name. Charu does not realize what Amal means to her until he leaves her to get married to someone else. But when she does realize the extent of her loss, that fact is not lost on her husband, who then leaves her to take up a job in Mysore. Scholars and biographers have speculated that *Nashtanir* is based on Tagore's real-life interactions with his boudhan, Kadambari Devi, wife of his older brother Jyotirindranath Tagore. Like Amal in the novel, Rabindranath too starts developing his love of literature alongside his sister-in-law; like Amal, he too leaves his love to get married and then go to England to study. But while the novella only hints at the disaster lying in store for Charulata, in real life, Kadambari Devi committed suicide within months of Rabindranath's marriage.

For many young men in India, bhabhis fill the socio-sexual gap with which they have grown up. Reporting from the ground in Banaras, Steve Derné notes that 'Indian men have little opportunity to interact with women outside their immediate families. In Banaras, men do not usually

attend schools or universities with women, and even in places where coeducation is common, a man usually has little experience interacting with women since parents try to limit daughters' contacts with young men. For younger sons, the often sexually charged relationship with their *bhabhis*—women who are defined as sexual creatures—is an important experience that may lead them to desire similarly close relationships with their own wives.' For the *bhabhi*, like for Kadambari Devi and Charulata, the presence of the *devar* fills a gap of emotional loneliness and physical longing.

This comfortable co-existence can be shattered for the *bhabhi* by the impending marriage of the *devar* since that takes him away both sexually and emotionally. This was the subject of a bold soap opera on Indian television that ran from December 2015 to April 2016. *Aadhe Adhoore* had as its protagonist Jassi, whose husband is working in the Middle East, and who lives with her mother-in-law and *devar*. In the very first episode we are told that Jassi and her brother-in-law are in an emotional and sexual relationship with one another. Jassi even gets pregnant during this affair and has an abortion. In order to provide a veneer for her relationship, she arranges a marriage for her *devar*, but predictably, everything goes wrong after that. In the case of *Aadhe Adhoore*, what also went wrong was a moralistic viewership, which wrote in frequently to demand that the 'characterless' Jassi be punished in the show. And so she was—made to fall to her death. Her *devar*'s wife stands triumphant and pregnant over her corpse. Like Charu and Kadambari, Jassi too succumbs to the intolerable pressure exerted by the departure of the *devar* from her love life.

Even Sita in the *Ramayana* seems to be aware of this



dynamic of desire in India. Devdutt Pattanaik points to an episode in the Valmiki *Ramayana* (dated between 200 BCE and CE) that makes such sexual tension clear: ‘This episode is fairly well known yet few people like to talk about it. It happens in the forest in the final year of Rama’s 14-year exile. Sita is so smitten by a golden deer that she begs her husband, Rama, to get it for her. After a long chase, Rama manages to shoot it down only to discover that it is no deer but a shape shifting demon who before dying mimics Rama’s voice and shouts, “Help, Sita! Help, Laxman!” Hearing this cry, Sita begs Laxman to go to Rama’s rescue. Laxman refuses since his brother had ordered him to protect Sita and not leave her side under any circumstances. Annoyed by his reticence, Sita says, “You wish his death in order to secure me. It is clear to me that just for me you have refrained from going to your brother...” These are the exact words of Makhan Lal Sen who translated the *Ramayana* of Valmiki in 1927... Laxman responds to the accusation with horror and to prove Sita wrong goes in search of Rama, leaving Sita unguarded. Shortly thereafter Sita is abducted by Ravana, the demon-king of Lanka.’ And thereby hangs a tale.

Elsewhere, in literature and life, the physical absence of the husband creates the necessary conditions for bhabhi-devar romance. An anthropological study in Kerala, which is the cradle of Indian migration to the Gulf, bears this out. ‘When men reach their late 20s or early 30s without being married (recently, relatively common because of Gulf migration), they are said to be “desperate” for a woman, and dangerously over-heated. These unmarried men can constitute a direct danger to the community, as they might start illicit sexual relations with married women (brother’s

wives in most common cases),’ note Filippo and Caroline Osella in ‘Migration, Money and Masculinity in Kerala.’ They even give as an example a case that was recorded in North Kerala: ‘While elder brothers Joyson and Joey worked away in the Gulf, their wives stayed back in Valiyagramam with their children, their husbands’ parents, and the youngest (unmarried) brother, Jojan, then in his late teens. When Joyson came home on leave, his wife appeared around the village with a black eye, while Jojan was extremely subdued: it was rumoured that Joyson had found evidence of an affair between his wife and Jojan and had beaten the pair of them. One year later, Joey came home unexpectedly, having received a letter from his mother informing him that Jojan had this time been found with his second sister-in-law. A public scene ensued, in which Joey openly beat his wife in the compound outside his house; she was later rushed to hospital, having drunk poison in a suicide attempt. When Joey returned to the Gulf, he took his wife and children with him.’

But most tales of bhabhi-devar romance are not tragic. In fact, extending the historical legacy of *niyoga*, bhabhis are very much in the realm of sexual fantasy in India. According to PornHub, one of the world’s most popular adult websites, India pushed Canada aside to become the world’s third largest online consumer of porn in 2015. Indians visited the site 21.2 billion times; of that number, 30% identified themselves as women. In ‘The Top 10 Searches of 2015 in India,’ PornHub lists ‘Indian’ as the top keyword search and ‘Indian Bhabhi’ as the second most frequently searched keyword. Fascinatingly, there was a 222% increase in the search for the phrase ‘Indian bhabhi devar.’ The Indian obsession with bhabhis is now measurable on international websites, and in comparison with the rest of the world.



<http://www.newindianexpress.com/lifestyle/books/2009/jun/06/savita-bhabhi-is-the-new-face-of-freedom-55291.html>

Savita bhabhi, of course, epitomizes this obsession. India's first and perhaps most famous porn icon, Savita bhabhi started life in 2008 (and was banned by the Indian government in 2009) as the star of a pornographic online cartoon series about a 'bored Indian housewife'. She fulfils the two considerations for bhabhi desire in India—her husband is not sexually interested in her, and she is sexually fascinating to younger men who call her bhabhi. Even more interestingly, and perhaps reflecting the increased percentage of female Indian visitors to porn websites, Savita bhabhi slakes her desire with devars of various stripes, from salesmen to enemies of the state. With her voluptuous figure, Savita bhabhi looks like a Barbie-Bhabhi. She is a fantasy of Indian male desire for bhabhis but she is also an expression of the sexually curious and bold Indian bhabhi herself who wants to be desired. Savita bhabhi could be the aspirational ideal for the Indian woman who visits PornHub in the dead of night. Or perhaps even in the broad light of day.

This modern-day bhabhi comes in multiple guises, and in Deepa Mehta's 1998 film, *Fire*, she finds herself in an interesting situation. *Fire* was not only passed by the Censor Board of India, but also commended by them as an important film for Indian women. Nonetheless, the censors asked for one fairly significant cut to be made before the film was released. This involved changing the name of one of the protagonists from Sita to Nita so as to avoid hurting religious sentiments. The change was in effect only in Maharashtra; all other places in India saw and heard Sita on screen.

The other protagonist—and Sita's love interest in the film—is named Radha, who too has an illustrious presence in Hindu mythology. But perhaps her name bothered the Censor Board less since Radha is already known as the extra-marital lover of a younger man who happens also to be the god Krishna. Thus, the name of Sita, the model of dutiful and self-sacrificing Indian womanhood, needed to be protected more than that of Radha.

In the film, both Radha and Sita/Nita occupy the position that bhabhis often do both in fantasies like *Savita Bhabhi* and also in real life: they are stuck in loveless marriages. One's husband prefers chastity to his wife while the other husband prefers a Chinese girlfriend. The women are drawn together because they lack both emotional and sexual sustenance in their marriages. This is the second staple of a classic bhabhi-devar romance, except that in this film the romance is between two sisters-in-law. Predictably, all hell breaks loose when their relationship is discovered. The film ends in a utopian manner, with Radha and Sita escaping the bounds of a patriarchal household to a dargah in which they seek refuge. But what is even more startling than the lesbian

desire openly depicted in the film is the fact that such desire remains within the bhabhi romance genre. Sita's husband, Jatin, calls Radha bhabhi because he is her husband's younger brother, and the usual suspect for an illicit romance with her. But this time, it is the brother-in-law's wife who runs away with the bhabhi.



Bhabi-love from *Fire*. Source: Hamilton-Mehta Productions

*Fire* was ground-breaking in several ways, but one of the most significant was that it provided a variation on the theme of the bhabhi-devar romance. By making the brother-in-law a sister-in-law instead, the film points to the pervasiveness of certain lines of attraction in the Indian family. Radha and Jatin get set aside in favour of Radha and Sita, but they continue to occupy the positions of desire that have been familiar to Indians from even before the writing of the *Manusmriti*.